



# Shoreline

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## A Sharp Nose and a Thin Lip

from an anecdotal article in the *Easton Gazette* May 31, 1862  
Morgan Fincham and Natasha Jones

Much was going on in the early 1860s on the Eastern Shore. The country was at war with itself; the threat of a draft hung over the Shore. A Home Guard was installed to keep the peace while most of the men were away fighting with their neighbors. Criminal activity still occurred, and a common punishment for sinister crimes was a one-way trip to the gallows. In the May 31, 1862, edition of the *Easton Gazette*, there is an anecdote about an unnamed man's death sentence.

Carried off in a cart on his way to a sudden stop and a short drop, a proclamation was issued that if any woman present in the gathering crowd would marry this man—under the gallows with the rope around his neck—he would be pardoned. Would anyone step forward to save a doomed life? Would any woman want to marry a criminal condemned to hang for his foul deeds?

One voice was heard, “I will,” cried a cracked voice from the midst of the crowd.”

Some generous soul had taken pity upon this man's plight, offering him a reprieve from death. The prisoner desired to see the lady so eager for matrimony. She stepped forward to the cart and he quickly examined her countenance.

“Nose like a knife,” said he, “lips like wafers. Drive on hangman.”

This story is not one of 19th-century notions of beauty, but instead represents the intersection of two 19th-century trends in popular culture: physiognomy and conduct literature.

Physiognomy is the art of interpreting the character and temperament of an individual from his or her physical (particularly facial) features. This art has its roots in the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers. In the fourth century BC work *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle asserted that: “It is possible to infer character from features, if it is granted that the body and the soul are changed together by the natural affections.”

This ancient art was popular in the nineteenth century, leaving many to believe that a sharp nose and a thin lip were definitive physical indications of a shrewd disposition, a highly undesirable characteristic in a woman. As this anecdote shows, the fear of such a disposition was so extreme that a man would rather die than marry a woman with pronounced indications of this objectionable characteristic.

Conduct literature, also known as advice literature, refers to a genre of work designed to provide instruction in proper social, familial and moral behavior. This instruction was not usually

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**FOOTLAND'S MIC CORDIAL,**  
A young man from Lyme, Connecticut, employed in New York, wrote to his mother for Mother, Can I Go?

**SPEECH OF A REPENTANT REBEL.**  
Ex-Governor Neil S. Brown, of Tennessee.

How is a large portion of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida. The Federal flag floats heavily over the soil of these Southern States. Where is the Southern

Of one age... for each... proportion... ber of... inserted... and... Meridian... year... will... in... various... the... within... All... will... receive...

**A sharp nose and thin lips are considered by physiognomists certain signs of a shrewd disposition. As a criminal was once on his way to the gallows, a proclamation was made that, if any woman would marry him under the gallows, with the rope around his neck, he would receive a pardon.**  
“I will,” cried a cracked voice from the midst of the crowd.  
The culprit desired the eager candidate for matrimony to approach the cart, which she did, and he began to examine her countenance.  
“Nose like a knife,” said he, “lips like wafers. Drive on hangman.”

**A WOULD BE MORMON.**—A physician at Bath, lately remarked, in a coffee house in that city, that he had three fine daughters, to whom he would give ten thousand pounds sterling each, and no one yet had come forward to marry them.  
“With your leave doctor,” said an Irishman, who was present, stepping up and making a respectable bow, “I’ll take two of them.”

offered in a direct way, but it was instead presented in the form of fictional stories that illustrated the disastrous consequences of improper behavior. Works of this type were initially written for both men and women, but by the late 17th century, conduct literature was largely concerned with guiding the behavior of women.

In the 17th through the 19th centuries, early Americans believed that men and women had fundamentally different, but essentially complementary, natures. The virtues of these opposing temperaments were believed to create balance in a marriage, and both sexes were encouraged to cultivate the better parts of their natures. As noted by Daniel Blake Smith, author of *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (1986): “For women this assumption meant that they were always to present themselves through their natural beauty and delicate nature as man's agreeable companion.”

Within the context of 19th-century trends in physiognomy and conduct literature, this 1862 anecdote ultimately moralized that a woman's pleasant character is more important than her appearance, but that her appearance is the most evident indication of her character. It also advised women of the potential consequences of possessing an unfavorable disposition; lacking the virtues associated with being an agreeable companion, a woman could not hope to secure a husband, even if the man's life depended (literally!) on taking a wife.

While modern women are allowed more freedom of manner and mood (no longer restricted to submissive pleasantness), appearance is still used to indicate one's temperament. This holds true for both sexes. A smile conveys so much to the world, as does a frown. The Nabb Research Center has recently acquired eight microfilm reels containing the *Easton Gazette* (1825 – 1885), and a visit with this collection will bring both to your face as you read such stories as the one above, as well as frightful accounts of terrible storms that shook the Shore, the progression of the war, and the characters of Delmarva that persevered through it all.

## "We're History... Without You"

### Nabb Research Center Wish List

The following books would be very useful for the research of Salisbury University students and local genealogists and historians. Donations to assist in purchasing these materials would be greatly appreciated.

**Dorchester County MD:**

*Tombstone Records of Dorchester County*, vols. 1-3 (\$52.50)

**Northumberland County, VA:**

*Deed and Wills 1650-1672, 1706-26* (\$249)

*Wills 1675-1709* (\$40)

*Order Book 1652-1695, 1699-1704, 1729-1742* (\$429.80)

**Lancaster County, VA:**

*Deeds 1701-1714* (\$62.50)

*Orders 1699-1706* (\$67.50)

*Jamestowne Ancestors, 1607-1699* by Virginia L. H. Davis,  
2006 (\$25)

### Upcoming Events Around the Shore:

**January 21 - Martin Luther King Jr. Day**

The Nabb Research Center will be closed.

**February 6 - Genealogy: How To Get Started**

Dr. Ray Thompson offers instruction on conducting a genealogical study of a family's history.

Wicomico County Free Library

Centre at Salisbury Branch, 10 a.m.

For more information call WCFL at 410-749-3612

**February 13 - 1861: A Time For Glory**

**Book talk and signing**

Author Robert Greenwalt discusses Book One of the *Civil War Soldier Series*.

Worcester County Library

Ocean City Branch, 2 p.m.

**21ST CENTURY CLUB** - Donation of \$1,000 and up includes lifetime membership (non-transferable), one complimentary Nabb Research Center publication, 35 percent discount on additional Nabb Research Center publications and enrollment in SU's President's Club.

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